FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

If the Heart Is Lean
Margaret Luongo
Louisiana State University Press
978-0-8071-3376-7
(August 31, 2008)

The characters of Margaret Luongo's short story collection are united not by outward demographics, but by a commitment to survival. Most have reached a moment of crisis. There are the usual births, marriages, and deaths, but there are also the unusual—for example, a professor who boils and slices his head's skin and muscle away to get his students' attention. This appropriately titled story, "Pedagogy," is as close as Luongo gets to hysterics. There is earnestness in these characters even if their lives seem less than grand. Like the pregnant woman in "Buoyant," they are all trying to get beyond the whirlpool to something better.

Although it is possible to draw such thematic threads through the stories of *If the Heart Is Lean*, this book is most satisfying for its refusal to limit itself. With the plethora of theme-based collections, it is refreshing to find a debut author in defiance of that trend. The leadoff story of a young woman's sexual conquest, "Pretty," is followed by "Every Year the Baby Dies" about a family's inability to keep their new arrivals alive. And then there are more surreal pieces such as "Pedagogy," and "Tiger" featuring a woman buying jewelry at Tiffany with her pet. All are given equal respect, if not equal page lengths. (Luongo can handle both the traditional short story and the short short.) In "What Nina Wants," a couple tries to save their marriage by role-playing, choosing Charles Mingus and Nina Simone, complete with Simone's handgun. True to Anton Chekhov's rule that a gun introduced in Act One must go off, there is a volley in the final pages of the story. However, Alicia-cum-Nina is unimpressed: "The sound of the gun firing doesn't sound like a gun firing when someone else pulls the trigger."

It is startling what Luongo can do with even typical fodder for drama such as break-ups and affairs. She is a master craftswoman who honed her skills perhaps while obtaining her M.F.A. at Florida University or while teaching at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Her stories have appeared in such well-respected journals as *Tin House* and *FENCE*. In the title story, the mistress of a dead man wants to see his heart; she explains, “if the heart was lean I’d know something else.” Luongo resists the urge to name that “something else,” distinguishing herself as a cunning new voice.

Erica Wright